

LITTLE BIRD BLUE

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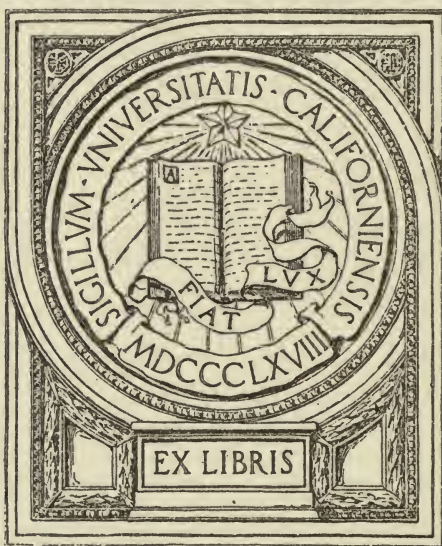


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By WILLIAM L. AND IRENE FINLEY

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LITTLE BIRD BLUE
THE BIOGRAPHY OF A BIRD





Little Bird Blue

BY

WILLIAM L. AND IRENE FINLEY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
R. BRUCE HORSFALL
AND FROM PHOTOGRAPHS
BY THE AUTHORS



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The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS
U . S . A

TO GRANDMOTHER B.
COMPANION OF THE CHILDREN
AND
FRIEND OF THE BIRDS

We are here! We are here!
Cheer! Cheer! Cheer!
Here again! Home again!
Dear! Dear! Dear!



LITTLE BIRD BLUE

CHAPTER I

All white and still lie stream and hill —
The winter dread and drear!
When from the skies a bluebird flies,
And — spring is here!

DALLAS LORE SHARP, *Winter.*



LITTLE BIRD BLUE

CHAPTER I

“THEY’ve come, Mother! They’ve come! The bluebirds have come!” And Phœbe Katherine and William stood at the window welcoming the drenched travelers with clapping of hands.

It had been a long, long time for the children since the last yellow outdoor days of autumn. The clouds had hung low and gray for weeks. The sky had been soaked and cheerless. For months the lawn had been swollen like a well-filled sponge. The garden lay soggy and dead. It seemed as if winter would never give way to the warm growing days of spring.

The first day of March crept in between fitful showers. It had rained all night; it had rained all the day before; and the children were toasting their toes before the fire when



suddenly they caught the plaintive call-note of the bluebird in the drip and dribble of the rain.

Outside on the wire two bluebirds sang the message from the Southland.

“We are here! We are here!
Cheer! Cheer! Cheer!”

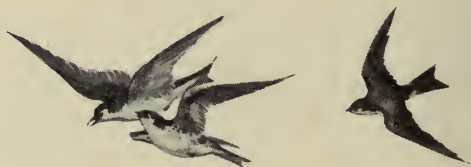
They flitted among the bushes and trees from the sozzled ground to the telephone wires, singing softly that eerie, witching call that fills the heart of the wintry world with hope — and a promise. The whole city lay wrapped in drifting mist. But through the gusts that flicked the rain against the window, the children saw sunshine on the bluebirds' wings; they heard spring in the bluebirds' song.

“I'm so glad Father fixed their house in time,” said William.

It is always an event in our family to get ready for the home-coming of the birds in the spring. It means to sweep and dust and clean and tidy up the last year's cottages and to build a new one, if there is a spare corner. There are no more nooks left in our attic for bird-houses. The families must be kept separate. Peace

prevails between the bluebirds and the violet-green swallows, but neither like their neighbors of English descent. Last spring the return of the bluebirds and swallows was anxiously waited for by the children.

For several seasons the bluebirds have occupied the flat in our west gable. The violet-green swallows still cling to the north gable, and the Eng-



lish sparrows — well, they rent nearly all the other available apartments on the first and second floors. A landlord is not always at liberty to draw a fine line in selecting his tenants when he owns city property.

Up under the sheltering eaves of

the west gable, overlooking the garden, was a round doorway that entered into Mr. and Mrs. Bluebird's home. They did not know that Father had cut a small unseen back door before they came, by which he and Mother and the children could sit quietly and watch the inner life



of the household.

Soon after the return, the children watched Mr. Bluebird. He flew up to the round door, clutched the step with his toes, and poked his head in to look. Then with a side turn,—

“We are here! We are here!
Cheer! Cheer! Cheer!”

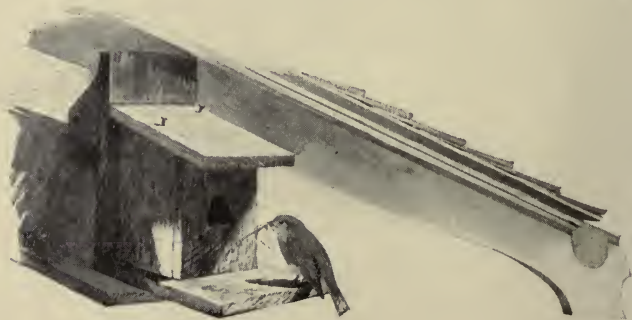
His mate crowded him to one side and popped in. She was out in a twinkling.

“Here again! Home again!
Dear! Dear! Dear!”

“Father, are you sure this is our own Mr. and Mrs. Bluebird?” asked Phœbe Katherine.

“Yes, I’m very sure,” said Father.

The sun shone, the earth steamed, the grass grew. Mr. and Mrs. Bluebird were very busy. Back and forth from the round door under the eaves they went, wing to wing, with straws in their bills. It took many days to

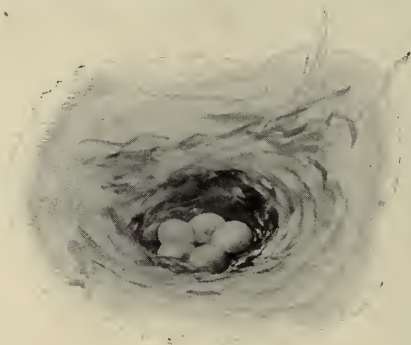


plan and furnish the home anew, to drape it with grasses, to bend and curve the straws just right, and to select and weave a soft carpet from the finer fibers. And they must hurry; there was so little time and so much to be done during the summer. Last year they had raised eleven children.

Once or twice a skulking shadow glided out close to them when they were gleaning grasses on the ground—a somber phantom that was to be watched and avoided as certain death.

Then one day Phœbe Katherine and William looked through the back door of the little house in the attic and saw five blue eggs. Mother Bluebird was at home a great deal. Either she or Father Bluebird had to stay with the eggs night and day to keep

them warm. Finally the promise was fulfilled; the eggs hatched and five



naked baby birds cuddled in the nest.

All was right with the world — and with the bluebirds.

It was nearly a week since the five babies had come into the gentle bluebird home. The children tramped up the stairs at Father's heels to visit the tenants of the attic bird-houses. One house had not been taken yet. Another had a family of four young violet-green swallows snuggled in

feathers with which Mother Swallow always lines her home. Nothing but broad, yellow-rimmed mouths told where one bird left off and the next began.

They tiptoed over to the bluebird house. The little girl and boy peered over Father's shoulder through a chink in the back door of the home.

"Are they all asleep, Father?" asked the little boy who had got a glimpse inside.

There was a queer expression on Father's face.

"Yes, they are asleep, Son."

All five naked bodies were lying very quiet in the nest. Father took up one after another—all cold—clammy—no, the legs of one bird drew up as they touched his warm hand.

“Why does n’t Mother Bluebird come with some food for her babies and get them warm?” asked the six-year-old girl.

There was no answer. Mother Bluebird did n’t come.

Oh, Mother Bluebird, why did we not guard you against that skulking



shadow, that sharp-fanged creature lying in wait for you? Poor mother of five attic babies, clothed in soft colors of earth and sky—refined in dress, gentle in disposition, valiant in spirit!

CHAPTER II

The bluebird is the only possible interpreter of those first dark signs of March ; through him we have faith in the glint of the pussy-willows, in the half-thawed peep of the hylas, and in the northward flying of the geese.

DALLAS LORE SHARP, *Wild Life Near Home.*



CHAPTER II

THE bird in Father's hand became a little less chilled. He was so scantily clothed—nearly naked—a few pin-feathers on the wings and one row down each side of the breast.

Tagged anxiously by the little girl and boy, Father brought the half-dead nestling downstairs. He put some cotton in a saucer in the warming-oven of the stove, laid the limp bird in it, put a little food in its mouth, then covered it with another bit of cotton. How helpless one feels with a naked baby bird on his hands!

Bird Blue was only a few days old when William and Phœbe Katherine adopted him. His nest was a saucer upon the back of the kitchen stove,

his mother a piece of cotton. One could hardly expect a baby bluebird to develop properly under such conditions; but to our surprise he thrived.

With joy and eagerness born of youth, the children took over the



cares of Mother Bluebird. They began the hunt. They caught flies indoors and out. They searched for millers, dug cut-worms among the roses, peas, and lettuce. Bird Blue's appetite grew apace. He understood immediately when the piece of cot-

ton left his back that it was dinner time. If it did not leave often enough, he poked his head up through the cotton and called lustily for lunch.



“He has eaten eight flies, three worms, and one miller, and still cries for more!” said Phœbe Katherine, somewhat out of breath and with waning patience.

Then the children began to dig angleworms. They were more abun-

dant and more filling. Every inch of ground in the corners among the rose-bushes was turned over.

“Mother, Bird Blue seems to think we have nothing else to do all day but attend to him,” said William.

One day we measured Little Bird Blue’s bill of fare and found that his dinners were heavier in actual weight than he was. He ate several feet of worms. It was as if a boy weighing fifty pounds should eat sixty pounds of meat at his three meals. He turned worms into feathers so rapidly that he grew more in a day than a boy does in a year. The first bit of blue showed in his tail and then in his wings. The marvel of it was, he made such rich blue tail feathers from yellow egg and green cut-worms.

A baby bird has no discretion as to what he should eat. Little Bird

Blue was thoughtless of everything save the eating. At first he opened his mouth and took everything that



was given him. Then he gradually learned to eat some things and reject others. Egg could be bolted, but he could not get a live angleworm down at one gulp. It had an irresistible tendency to wriggle out and crawl away, which sometimes happened. It was then picked up by the children and served again.

In some respects, angleworms were better from the standpoints of both the children and the birds. After swallowing a long angleworm dinner, Bird Blue felt satisfied and



grew drowsy, often to be awakened and find that his dinner was crawling out of his mouth.

So it sometimes happened that one worm was lengthened into two, three, or even four dinners. After swallowing a live worm, Bird Blue's expression showed that he had a sickish, wiggling feeling in his stomach. He soon learned that a worm was a thing to be pounced upon and killed. He took it by the head or tail and slatted it against the perch. He had a knack

of running it through his bill as a shirt goes through a wringer. Then he whacked it on the other end back and forth until the worm stopped wiggling.

We gave Little Bird Blue the freedom of the back porch. It was large and roomy, but he did not like to stay alone. The minute there was a crack in the kitchen door, he tried to squeeze in. He was just learning



to fly. The table looked tempting to him, so he hopped back where he could get a good start. But the second round of a chair was as high as he could fly. He slipped off and went back to try it again. This per-

formance he continued for two days, until finally, by getting back near



the door, with a good start he could fly to the top of the table.

He was not a nuisance about dipping into things; he wanted to sit on your finger or shoulder or snug-

gle against your neck. He needed companionship.

One of the first and most difficult lessons Little Bird Blue had to learn was to pick up food for himself. As a rule, a fledgling is very slow about hunting his own dinner; he depends as long as possible on his parents. Bird mothers and fathers are like human parents; it is sometimes hard for them to insist on a child's earning his own living.

As soon as Bird Blue was well feathered, instead of giving him food every time he opened his mouth, we gave him a bite or two and then held the morsel temptingly before him. He soon learned to take it and then to pick it up for himself. This lesson required three days—a long time in the life of a bluebird.

One day a neighbor brought in

a young English sparrow that was sick — a neglected street urchin. We



put the waif on the back porch with Little Bird Blue. He scanned the newcomer, then he took a nearer view. He finally stretched out long and thin as one might rise in dignity.

“I fear I cannot associate with you,” he seemed to say by a saucy turn of his head.

It may have been merely his an-

cestral air of aloofness. An incident the next day proved that Little Bird Blue had the heart of a certain Samaritan.

Both birds were hungry. When we set out a dish of egg and some worms, Little Bird Blue ate his dinner. But the baby sparrow did n't know a thing about picking up his own meals. He sat humped down with his chin on his chest until Bird Blue flew near



him. Then his mouth popped open like a Jack-in-the-box and his wings quivered. In another moment Bird Blue had seized a worm from the

pan, run it twice through his bill, pounded it against the perch, and thrust it hastily into the open mouth.

“See what a good father Little Bird Blue is,” exclaimed William a little later.

“No, I believe Little Bird Blue is a lady bird because he knows how to take such good care of Baby Sparrow,” whispered Phœbe Katherine confidentially.

CHAPTER III

Our feelings for the bluebird are much mixed. His feathers are not the attraction. He is bright, but on the whole rather plainly dressed. Nor is it altogether his voice that draws us; the snowflakes could hardly melt into tones more mellow, nor flecks of the sky's April blue run into notes more limpid, yet the bluebird is no singer. The spell is in the spirit of the bird. He is the soul of this somber season, voicing its sadness and hope. What other bird can take his place and fill his mission in the heavy, hopeful days of March?

DALLAS LORE SHARP, *Wild Life Near Home.*



THE
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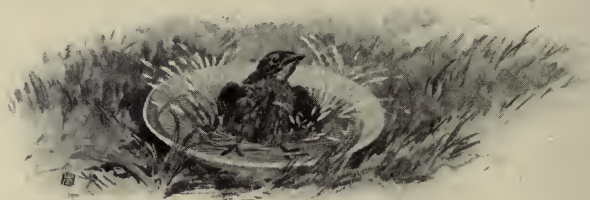
TO THE
HONORABLE
MEMBERS OF THE
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

CHAPTER III

LITTLE BIRD BLUE had never been taught to go into a dish of water, but by the time he was nearly fledged he began washing himself. His first bath was overdone. He did not know exactly how to flit his feathers—in-
stead of a wash, he took a soak. He was so drenched that when he started to fly, he dropped to the floor with a thud—the feathers stuck to his body so tight. How fatal such a bath would have been in the wild outdoors. In such a helpless condition, he would have been at the mercy of the first prowler that came along. After a few times, without any teacher he learned to dip the tips of his wings in and rub the water into the

feathers of his back and sides and bathe thoroughly, and yet not leave himself soaked and helpless.

Each morning the children took him out on the back lawn to bathe.



One day, after his bath, when he cuddled in Phœbe Katherine's hands, she discovered something.

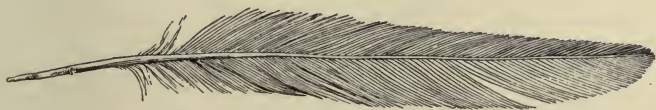
"Little Bird Blue has n't enough feathers to cover him," she said.

"No," answered Father, "in looking at a bird, one might think his feathers grew all over his body as the hair grows on your head, but this is not so. The feathers grow in lines. You see by parting them on Little Bird Blue's breast, it is

bare ; other parts of his body are also naked. There is a line of feathers down each side of his breast. When his coat is wet, it does not cover him, but when dry, it spreads out and he is completely clothed."

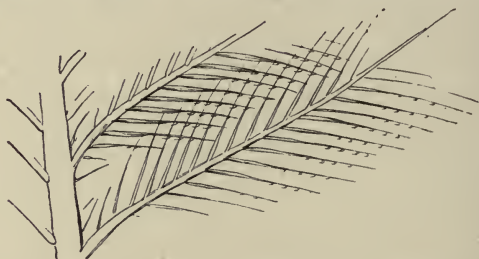
"I wish I could fly like Little Bird Blue," said Phœbe Katherine, as he settled on her finger ; "he does it so easily."

"You must see how this little bluebird has been clothed," said Father, as he picked up a fallen feather.



"Each wing and tail feather is made so light, and yet it is so strong. The little quill is hollow like a balloon, yet bends double and springs back without breaking. On each side of the quill is a row of tinier feathers or

featherlets. Each featherlet has many barbs or hooks. These featherlets cling so tightly to one another that



neither air nor water can force its way through Little Bird Blue's coat.

“He has two kinds of feathers,” continued Father; “some are loose and fluffy to keep his little body warm, and others are smooth and stiff for flying. This is the way he flies. When his wing is spread it is like a little saucer turned upside down. When he drives his wing down hard, the air below forces him up. The front of his wing is strong and stiff, but the ends of the

feathers are soft and the air caught beneath, escapes behind, just as the paddle wheel at the stern of a boat catches the water and drives the boat forward. So when Little Bird Blue beats his wings rapidly, he flies easily."



When Little Bird Blue was a month old, his breast was spotted like that of the young wood thrush and robin. All three birds belong to the same family. But the bluebird is a real American, for he is not found in any other coun-



try. The first moult or change of dress from babyhood to full birdhood came after the second month. The spotted vest was changed for one of reddish-brown; the gray mottled



coat on his back turned to one of blue.

How carefully Mother Nature dresses her feathered children! In



ROBIN, THRUSH, AND BLUEBIRD

most cases she gives them their brightest colors in springtime. This is their season of love and home-making. Toward the end of summer, when breast feathers are worn thin, tails broken, and wings frayed, she loosens the old dress and a fresh suit of feathers is fitted on. This is the bird's traveling suit, mother and father clothed much alike, both dull and inconspicuous, to escape the notice of many sharp-

eyed enemies on the long journey South.

One day we were asked to dine in the country. The children could n't leave Little Bird Blue, so William bundled him into a basket. As we sat in the car, Bird Blue began to cheep to get out. Amidst the rumble and other noises of the car and the street, no one paid any attention at first. Soon the continued chirp attracted the lady in the next seat. She looked at William and then at the basket. He answered by lifting the lid a little for her to see. In another instant Little Bird Blue slipped out and sat on her shoulder.

"I want to ride here," he said with a twinkle of his wings.

William took him in his hands and the passengers smiled at the

baby bluebird sitting contentedly on the little boy's finger.

One might think that bluebirds could not talk, yet Little Bird Blue



had a well-defined language. His conversation developed somewhat along the following lines. When he first became an orphan, he had a very thin, wavering call which was a real baby chirp. This soon changed from a whining note to one of hunger.

By the time he was fifteen days old, this chirp became as continuous as his breathing. It was quite rhythmic, — one chirp for every two breaths, — a kind of a location call so the children might know where he was when they came with food. As he grew in intelligence, this hunger call was lost, perhaps because it might be heard by a prowling cat. Then he began using the typical mellow bluebird call — a plaintive whistle.

Little Bird Blue had certain low notes of conversation that could be termed talk as purely as any human words ever uttered. Toward evening, when he cuddled in your hand and spread his feathers to let his little breast rest against the warm flesh, he turned his head and looked into your eye and asked very plainly: —

“Will you not sleep with me to-night? I am but a tiny bird; I need you.”

Or when you gave him a rather unusual morsel, a fat, pure-white



millar, he knocked it briskly against your finger or flew to a harder perch, where it was deftly killed; then back to your finger he came to draw his bill across your sleeve

and wipe his face, looking up with the same confiding expression in his eye and saying:—

“Thank you, very much. You are very good to me.”

These soft conversational bird-notes of love and confidence and



sympathy were readily understood by the children. The love for this gentle creature of the outdoors is

what the children got from Little Bird Blue. To be sure, Little Bird Blue needed the children ; but oh, how much the children needed Little Bird Blue!

CHAPTER IV

When Nature made the bluebird she wished to propitiate both the sky and the earth, so she gave him the color of the one on his back and the hue of the other on his breast, and ordained that his appearance in spring should denote that the strife and war between these two elements was at an end. He is the peace-harbinger ; in him the celestial and terrestrial strike hands and are fast friends. He means the furrow and he means the warmth ; he means all the soft, wooing influences of the spring on the one hand, and the retreating footsteps of winter on the other.

JOHN BURROUGHS, *Wake-Robin*.

CHAPTER IV

LITTLE BIRD BLUE's life was one of simplicity, content, and happiness. It was pitched in a low key. He was born with a gentle disposition, not with a heart to stir things up. His was a sunny, joyous life close to the earth. His wants were few, — a branch on the back porch, egg and worms, especially early in the morning, plenty of air, a little water, and all the sunshine he could get.

He was not a singer, but he had a personality, rich, full of promise and purpose. He dropped softly to your shoulder with noiseless movement of wings and looked squarely into your eye. He settled on your

finger as if he owned it, alert and independent. He trusted you.

Think of the lessons Little Bird Blue had to crowd into the brief



space of two or three months! He had to grow from babyhood to birdhood. He had to form his whole idea of the world directly opposite to the teachings of his ancestors. He grew from egghood to a fully fledged bird in eighteen days, a development that takes a child eight-

een years. In this brief period, he had to learn to pick up leaves that lay on the ground, turn over small clods, look under limbs, and lift blades of grass to find bugs and worms. He learned from experience that a fly was to be pounced upon and eaten, while a fiery-tailed bee was to be let alone.

He learned that air and glass are both clear, but that one cannot fly through a closed window. He learned that it was better to sleep in the patches of sunlight than shiver in the shade; that fire is comfortable at a distance, but very dangerous when too near. He learned that when caught out in a storm one has to select the sheltered side of a tree, and when going to bed in the rain one cannot put his head under his wing as usual because the

water runs down through his feathers, but his clothes have to be drawn down and made water-tight,



even at the expense of a cold nose. If, during the day he sits too near the tree-top, a poised hawk, like a sharpshooter, may pick him off; if he moves or talks in his sleep, some big owl may gather him in. How many problems to unravel, dangers to avoid — how many things to remember for a poor motherless bluebird! And, oh, how many snares and enemies await our dear Little Bird Blue!

Perhaps it would have been far better for Little Bird Blue to be reared in the tiny cavern of some old stump in the corner of a pasture. His idea of mankind would have been clearer. How could he be expected to know the difference between one boy who carries a gun and another who scatters crumbs?



If the thoughtless boy who kills birds could but feel Little Bird Blue perch on his finger and see how he

turned his head and talked, he could never kill a bluebird.

The leaves began to grow yellow and red in the later days of summer; the sky looked bluer and the air was chillier. A feeling of change came over the earth. Little Bird Blue felt this. It was the beginning of the great moving season of his parents. His restlessness came not of discontent, but of necessity.

“Why do birds move away in winter, Father? We have to stay here,” said William.

“Many of the birds live on insects. Moths, flies, and worms are plentiful about our garden and orchard in the summer, but in the fall and winter they hide away in chinks and crevices and sleep through the cold. This makes food so scarce for the bluebirds that they would starve,

so they have to fly away to the Southland, where it is warm in winter and where food is abundant. But Robin, Meadowlark, Vireo, and Bluebird do not forget the apple tree, the pasture, the dogwood by the house, and the home in the attic. So when winter is nearly over, Bluebird comes again."

In the brief period that Phœbe Katherine and William cared for Little Bird Blue, he counteracted all the training of his ancestors who had learned not to trust man. He confided in his human friends above all others. When afraid, he fled to the children; when cold, he snuggled in the round nest made by their hands. If cuddled in a hand, he dropped to sleep instantly. When his eye closed, the upper lid did not drop down like a curtain, but the

lower lid rose. By this arrangement, Little Bird Blue's eye was ever on the point of dropping open, which



is perhaps one of Mother Nature's ways to help her children sleep as wide awake as possible.

For three months Little Bird Blue was a member of our family. The thing that satisfied him yesterday satisfied him to-day. Yet there was one hidden power that seemed to move him, but about which he did

not tell us. It was easy for him to say when he was hungry, when he wanted water for a bath, or when he wanted to cuddle in your hand to get warm. When he was but a baby and was taken out into the open, he sat contentedly on a shoulder, turned his head this way and that, scanning the blue sky where other birds were passing back and forth and playing high up. It was all new to him; he did n't understand it. He had only known his blue egg, his bird-house, a saucer with a cotton mother, and human companions whom he loved.

Little Bird Blue liked the back yard. He flew from the porch to the cherry tree and back to the currant bush. Then one morning something happened. He was restless; he did n't eat all of his breakfast.

He flew out into the sunshine and to the porch again. He was in a bustle — a hurry as one who is ready



to go on a journey, impatient to start, yet not quite decided.

Two strange bluebirds lit on the wire; another sat on the top of the neighbor's house. They called and Little Bird Blue answered. One dropped to the clothes-line near him, where he began preening his feathers, unconcerned, silent, yet full of

purpose, as one bird communes with another. Then the stranger launched into the air, crying, "Come! Come!"



It was the call of the race. It was the song of the fall flocking. Little Bird Blue answered, quivering, exultant, tense. Then he flew to the arms of the children.

Two days later he left us, friend and companion of Phœbe Katherine and William. All day they searched the apple trees, the bushes, the wires along the streets, and the tops of the houses.

"I'm sure he will not leave us," said Phœbe Katherine in tears.

That night he did not return to

his perch nor the next day. And now it is a month. How the hearts of the children have gone out for him!

On Little Bird Blue's right leg is a tiny aluminum band with the number 3480. Think it not strange, dear child, if some day he drops to your shoulder. He is unafraid of children. He may be hungry for a worm. He needs your protection. If he comes to live in your attic, he will bring you happiness.



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